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AUTHOR Partridge, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Educators are successfully incorporating electronic mail into elementary and secondary classrooms. This paper refers to an article by Hugh Barr which describes a variety of instructional programs that use electronic mail as part of the social studies curriculum. Barr notes that essential components of interschool e-mail are purpose, structure, and a clear time frame within which to work. Barr also notes that the focus of electronic mailing projects is on the process rather than the content. Legitimate warnings concerning the use of e-mail must be heeded--commercialism must be avoided, teachers must be involved in development and properly trained in the technology, and the content of e-mail messages must be kept above the mundane. Ernest Boyer, the president of Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has released a blueprint of a "Basic School" in which literacy is the first and most essential goal. Educators should keep open minds about the wonders of technology and should thoroughly investigate the pros and cons of using it in their particular situations. Teachers should be thoroughly aware of, and thoroughly prepared for, dealing with all ramifications of e-mail before undertaking it. Teachers should also read reputable educational periodicals which can stimulate thought about current educational concerns, and exercise their voting rights and vote for legislators who are truly interested in seeing that the best education possible is provided for students. (RS)

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Susan Partridge

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The Inclusion of E-mail in Our Teaching: A Discussion

ED 383 012

We are now finding articles in reputable periodicals about the successful use of e-mail both here and abroad. Those educators who are willing to try to find ways of improving the education we offer our young people are to be commended. Examples of a couple of e-mail programs are offered and are followed by personal comments based on decades of teaching at both the elementary and secondary levels and, currently, very active in educational concerns. (Writing for the ERIC database).

"Social Studies by Electronic Mail," an article written by Hugh Barr (2), senior lecturer in social studies education and chairperson of the Department of Curriculum and Subject Studies in the School of Education at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, appeared in the July/August 1994 issue of The Social Studies.

Barr states what is generally accepted by educators, that is, "that learning occurs best when learners are involved in goal setting and when the learning process is seen by them as meaningful and purposeful." He says, "In social studies, this would seem to suggest that probably the most ineffective way to learn about another culture is to read about it in a book because it is part of a required curriculum." He continues, "Conversely, the most effective learning should be that which takes place when students are eager to learn about the society under study, when learning is active rather than passive, and when learners can be involved directly with members of the culture concerned."

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Diane Ravitch, who has been connected with the U.S. Office of Education in Washington, D.C., describes our culture "as a common culture, as the work of whites and blacks, of men and women, of Native Americans and African Americans, of Hispanics and Asians, of immigrants from England, France, Germany, Mexico, Haiti, Ireland, Colombia, Scandinavia, Cuba, Italy, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Korea, India, China, the Philippines and Ghana; of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Mormons, and millions of other individuals who added their voices to the American chorus." How can we take advantage of this great variety?

Money must be considered as innovative programs are added to, or replacing, the existing programs. Throughout decades, witness has been borne to the failure of programs which might have been successful but had to be discontinued "midstream" because of a lack of funds. Thorough and advanced planning by those concerned should avoid such disasters. Fortunately, there are some educators whose foresight has permitted them to complete their studies. However, there is another "money problem" to be considered.

In regard to the study of various cultures, a question arises: If the available money doesn't cover the cost of the electronic equipment needed, might the study of the various ethnic groups we have in America be a reasonable substitute for those abroad? It is believed that the MOST good for the MOST students should be the determining factor in spending the available money.

It is generally known that, in the past, some of our students have corresponded with pen pals from abroad, but, as Barr points out, the time required in using regular mail, or even air mail, lessens the original enthusiasm and shifts students' interests to new topics. He

says that the advent of electronic mail offers a solution to this problem.

Body language - a frown, a smile, a raised voice, raised eyebrows, a wink, arm gestures, etc. often add to our enjoyment and an interpretation of the speaker's message. How do students feel about this?

When computers became common in schools, students and workers, selected at random, at a prestigious university said, in response to the question, "Would you rather be taught by a professor or a computer?" that they wouldn't want to miss the body language of their classmates as they participated in discussions because it provided them with information and enjoyment.

In regard to direct access to students of various ethnic origins, it is believed that the American schools are in a position to provide this. Diane Ravitch (5) has provided us with authentic information about the great variety in origin and creed of the many immigrants now living in our country. This is not true of all countries. For example, immigration laws in New Zealand favor Anglo Saxons. E-mail "at home" might be considered for direct involvement with those of other races and creeds.

Barr offers, and explains, some of the exchanges between children of New Zealand and those of America; a couple of examples follow:

"Students at Glenview School in Hamilton, New Zealand, knew from their research that Kansas experienced snow and tornadoes. They were able to ask their counterparts in Emporia, Kansas, what games they played in winter when it snowed and if they had experienced a tornado.

They were thrilled when Nicholas Black, of Emporia, replied." His reply follows:

"On June 7th of 1990 our town was hit by a tornado. It was really very scary because I was at one end of my baseball games when the sirens went off. We drove quickly home and went down into our basement. A couple of homes were destroyed but no one was killed."

Since earthquakes are common in New Zealand but rather rare in Kansas, this gave the Kansas children the opportunity to ask their New Zealand friends about earthquakes.

Barr spoke of another e-mail program, this one at Newstead School near Hamilton, New Zealand. He said, "When students at Newstead School corresponded with a school in the United States, they displayed incoming mail on a large bulletin board for everyone to see and read. Although most incoming mail was read avidly, some was virtually ignored. Newstead students explained their choice by saying 'kids didn't write that; it was written by a teacher'."

Barr offered three basic elements that University of Waikato School of Education researchers have found to be essential components of interschool e-mail - purpose, structure, and a clear time frame within which to work. He went on to explain what happens when there is a lack of clear structure. He reported that many critics find the focus of electronic mailing to be on the process rather than the content, and this results in shallow and superficial questions and responses.

He described an interesting grand conclusion of what, supposedly, was considered a successful e-mail project; the description follows:

"When Newstead School, in Hamilton, New Zealand, completed its study of New Mexico, they held New Mexico Day. The New Zealand children

ate enchiladas and sopapillas, and sang cowboy songs in English and Spanish."

Barr reported that the morning after New Mexico Day, teachers and parents had Newstead students at the University of Waikato Educational and Media Centre at eight o'clock in the morning (three o'clock the previous afternoon in Las Cruces, New Mexico) where the university faculty had arranged an international teleconference. The excited children on different sides of the world spoke to their new friends and sang their school songs to each other.

Not all schools are close to a university where advantage can be taken of the many opportunities it affords, and this must be taken into account. Throughout decades, witness has been borne to the failure of programs "copied" by some of our schools without giving adequate attention to the many differences between the two schools concerned.

Barr is to be credited for giving the opinions of others concerning the use of e-mail, as it is advisable to avoid the pitfalls rather than falling into them. A couple of examples follow:

Barr quoted Beasley (1990) as arguing that students' e-mail messages, in many instances, resemble the kinds of handwritten notes they pass to each other in class. He also quoted Goldberg (1989) as saying that exercises in electronic mailing lack structure and direction.

Barr contributed some suggestions for avoiding the tardy delivery of mail, and he has warned that MANY critics argue that too often the focus of electronic mailing projects is on the process rather than on the content.

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Though Barr is to be commended for the information he has given about the e-mail projects and also for some pitfalls to be avoided, his closing statement seems to make the use of e-mail in teaching seem easier than it is. The statement follows: "Electronic mailing can provide teachers with the opportunity to make social studies projects meaningful and exciting. The technology is available and easy to use. All that is required is for teachers to devise appropriate projects with purpose and structure."

A few questions come to mind: Available to all? Easy to use - by whom? ALL that is required of teachers?

Some universities and private schools are heavily endowed and, therefore, money is not the great concern that it is in other situations. For much too long, witness has been borne to the plunging of teachers into programs for which they have not been properly trained and programs in which they have had no part in devising.

The importance of heeding some legitimate warnings concerning the use of e-mail in our teaching cannot be overestimated, for again and again witness has been borne to the failure of potentially successful programs because "hindsight was better than foresight."

Many must remember the installation of language laboratories in our high schools a number of years back. Witness was borne to their installation and, not too long after, to their demolition. This seemed to be another case of inadequate foresight.

If e-mail is being used in teaching, it is very important that correct information be given in serious e-mail correspondence. Just recently, an Associated Press (1) article, "Commercials Invade the Classroom, Consumer Group Says," appeared in <u>The News and Observer</u>, a

Raleigh, North Carolina newspaper. The sub-title read, "Growing budgetary concerns have pushed schools to accept products with commercial messages." It might be added that commercials have also invaded the homes as some sponsored programs on TV seem to contain information of questionable accuracy. Obviously, classroom materials should be screened for accuracy and freedom from commercialism.

The report also contained information about a finding of Consumer's Union given five years ago which stated that children were bombarded with more than 30,000 messages a year, and thousands of companies were developing videos, guidebooks and giveaways to reach school pupils.

One of several criteria Barr gave for the most effective learning was "when learners can be involved directly with members of the culture concerned." It is felt that America provides many opportunities for this involvement, as we have rural, suburban and large urban areas to accommodate the increasing diversity in the ethnic groups coming to our shores.

A couple of examples given below show how immigrants found a way to keep some happy reminders of their native land and still be grateful for, and very loyal to, their "new" country.

The very names given to some communities years ago remain to this day - West Berlin, and Germania. The names of the streets - Duerer St. (Named after Duerer, the famous artist) and Leipsig St. Family names, Kaufmann and Butterhoff, also add to easy identification of this ethnic group.

Another community with a large Italian population adapted readily to everything American - even rooted for the Phillies. The people

learned and spoke excellent English and had good public and private schools to which they could send their children. They were, and still are, Americans to the "nth" degree, and were, and still are, productive and loyal citizens.

Each of these communities is located within commuting distance of a large city, and many of the people take advantage of the various cultural activities the city affords.

Obviously, the two communities described above did not have the great variety of ethnic groups coming to our shores today, though some of other ethnic origin have settled among them where they, too, can enjoy the advantages that the city provides and find those of "kindred spirit" who have chosen to live in the city.

The established communities have accepted the "newcomers," and the "newcomers" have adapted to their new homes. Perhaps the fact that the communities were well established and the citizens happy and productive and the fact that both communities were within commuting distance of a large city with its diverse population may have contributed to the peaceful and early adaptation.

One of the criticisms of e-mail which has been voiced by some interested educators is that it lacks structure and direction, with the result that e-mail messages often deal with the mundane.

It may be that Don J. Poling's (4) article, "E-Mail as an Effective Teaching Supplement," in which he discusses his e-mail program, has some information that might keep correspondence above the mundane.

First of all, his idea of using e-mail as a supplement rather than an elaborate and costly program might be of interest to those who prefer a conservative approach to its use.

Poling states that e-mail can be effective for the following: "answering direct questions from any student, counseling, class assignments, occasional quizzes, direct communication with a particular student, posting grades, helpful hints about homework or upcoming quizzes or tests and excuses for missing class."

Regarding students' questions, he said, "This is perhaps the MOST valuable and productive of the many aspects of using electronic mail. I have found that a student who would NEVER ask a question in class for fear of sounding stupid or because he/she feels somewhat intimidated, will willingly and easily ask very pointed and meaningful questions while hidden behind a computer terminal."

It is agreed that this aspect of the use of e-mail and, perhaps, other aspects can be valuable and productive; however, there are some - general class announcements, for instance, that I have never found much of an inconvenience.

Poling's ambition is to be admired and, undoubtedly, his answers with their correct grammar and accurate information have the possibility of making his students more literate and more concerned with giving correct information.

Poling is also to be commended for giving a number of down-sides to using an e-mail system in this fashion - time, student participation, disk space, incrimination and nuances.

Along with the many articles about programs using technology in teaching that are found in reputable educational periodicals, we are

also finding some that are not but are well worth the consideration of educators. An example follows:

Ernest Boyer, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has released a blueprint that he feels will "provide a realistic vision of what elementary education in America should look like." Laura Miller's (3) report of the program, found in the April 12, 1995 issue of Education Week, explained the program just as Boyer was set to release a blueprint of the program. A few highlights of her report follow:

> In the Basic School, "literacy is the first and most essential goal," Mr. Boyer's report declares. Students concentrate on the basics of reading and writing.
>
> When children study different disciplines, they approach them not as isolated subjects but as part of larger themes, such as "the use of symbols," "producing and consuming," or "living with purpose." Such themes help students see academic material in the larger context of the world.
>
> Students are evaluated through written examinations, teacher observations, their own products and performances, and parent information.

It was encouraging to learn that The Basic School also evaluates itself on many items most teachers would find important - class size, teaching schedules, student grouping, resources and counseling.

Below is a quick overview of the Basic School plan:

The Basic School

The following are key elements of the Basic School plan:

The School as Community
Building community
Teachers as leaders
Parents as partners

A Curriculum With Coherence
The basic tools
The core commonalties
Measuring results

A Climate for Learning
Patterns to fit purpose
Resources to enrich
Services for children

A Commitment to Character
The core virtues
Living with purpose

It will be noted that the issue of character is not skirted. Undoubtedly, there are those who will disagree with Boyer. However, there are those who will agree. Kelly Thompson (6) quoted Thomas Lickona, a psychologist and education professor as saying, "Research shows there are universal values that occur in every culture."

Lickona told a group of parents and teachers that there are many problems in today's schools that can't be solved by adults alone. He then offered an example of including students in the solution. The example concerned a school that had removed soap dispensers from the bathrooms because students kept breaking them.

When a group of fourth- and fifth-graders made it known that they wanted to have soap again, the principal and teachers helped them develop a set of rules and sent them around to the classrooms to explain how the system would work.

Lickona told his audience that the system taught students to work together, to take responsibility for themselves and to communicate. He said it also solved a big "headache" for the school. Obviously, some of today's crimes in schools - shooting, even killing - require the involvement of "the law."

Conclusions

Since we are living in an age when the wonders of technology never seem to cease, and are receiving reports of the successful use of it in e-mail programs, it is concluded that educators should keep open minds and thoroughly investigate the pros and cons of using it in their particular situations, as each situation is different.

It is also concluded that it's fine to have a vision, but vision without focus is apt to result in failure. There are, indeed, many points on which to focus before introducing an e-mail program, among them, the amount of available money, adequate teacher preparation, parental involvement and interest, the make-up of the student body concerned, and meeting the needs and interests of all the students.

It is further concluded that teachers should read the reports of educators whose reports on successful e-mail programs are found in current issues of reputable educational periodicals but should not copy them exactly as, undoubtedly, their situations would not be identical with those of the teachers reporting their programs.

Finally, it is concluded that teachers should pay heed to the pitfalls which the teachers reporting their e-mail programs have offered.

Implications for Teachers

1. Teachers must be thoroughly aware of, and thoroughly prepared for, dealing with all ramifications involved in a successful e-mail program before undertaking one.
2. Emphasis must be on the content, not on the process.
3. Student correspondence must be above the mundane.

4. The program must have structure, direction and a clear time frame.

5. Serious e-mail correspondence requires correct information.

6. Classrooms should have sufficient material that has been carefully screened for accuracy and is free from commercialism.

7. Interest and involvement of parents should be sought as they are taxpayers.

8. Teachers shouldn't copy successful e-mail programs as no two situations are exactly alike. Adjustments may have to be made and, in some cases, a different program must be considered if the best interests of the students are to be served.

9. Teachers should read current issues of reputable educational periodicals as they can stimulate thought about current educational concerns.

10. Teachers should also read the editorial section of newspapers as it contains letters from citizens who are letting readers know how they feel about current educational concerns - the cost of elaborate equipment, for example.

11. Teachers should exercise their voting rights and vote for legislators who are truly interested in seeing that the best education possible is provided for our young people.

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